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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 001147

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PINS PINR IZ

SUBJECT: SADIQ AL-RIKABI UPBEAT ON REBUILDING SADR CITY,  
DOWNBEAT ON THE NEIGHBORS

Classified By: Political Counselor Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Special Assistant to the President Brett McGurk met on April 10 with Sadiq al-Rikabi, political advisor to Prime Minister Maliki. Rikabi detailed a \$150 million plan to rebuild Sadr City and Shula, Sadrists-heavy neighborhoods in Baghdad which have seen heavy fighting since late March. Rikabi also noted increased Shia tribal support for Maliki in Sadr City and Nasiriya, and sought reassurance that the U.S. continues to support Maliki's operation in Basrah. Rikabi was pessimistic on relations with the neighbors, predicting Maliki's offensive would have little impact on the Arab states, refusal to engage Iraq. On the SFA/SOFA process, Rikabi said Maliki has accepted the arrangement of two separate negotiating teams, but still wants the process to yield a single document covering bilateral relations. End summary.

¶2. (C) Rikabi said the cabinet has allocated \$100 million for Sadr City and \$50 million for Shula, both Sadrists-dominated Baghdad neighborhoods which suffered damage from fighting between the Iraqi security forces (ISF) and the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM). Twenty percent of each allotment is for cleaning up the effects of the violence, for example clearing rubble and repairing damaged buildings. Rikabi noted two competing proposals for the other eighty percent ) either to build 4,000 apartments elsewhere in Baghdad to relieve congestion in the Shia slums, or build a &Sadr Industrial City& to absorb the unemployed and project an air of economic renewal. Haqq al-Hakim, who Rikabi said is a Sadr City community leader, will supervise the cleanup effort; Rikabi also said work would start on Sunday, April 13 in Sadr City, but Shula will require more groundwork. Work will start in the areas of Sadr City already under Iraqi Security Forces, (ISF) control, and expand as security permits. Rikabi emphasized the symbolic import of such gestures ) people need to see within days, not months, that the GOI is on their side and their recent suffering was not for nothing.

¶3. (C) Rikabi asked the &real8 U.S. position on the recent Basrah operation, saying he has heard we were unhappy and had specific instructions from Maliki to determine where the U.S. stands. McGurk assured him we supported Maliki's decision one hundred percent, and that our focus now is to employ carrots as well as sticks to win over the population, isolate the irreconcilable, and counter the perception the U.S. and GOI are collaborating against the entire Sadr Trend. Rikabi agreed, but emphasized that any sign of weakness or a pacific approach to the Sadr mainstream might do more to protect JAM apologists than the truly innocent. He also brushed off threats from leading Sadrists parliamentarians that Sadr might cancel the JAM freeze, saying in practice the freeze has been over for weeks.

¶4. (C) As an example of how &strength8 produces results, Rikabi produced lists of tribal leaders in Sadr City and Nasiriyah who he claimed had pledged Maliki their

loyalty, each saying he could mobilize between 250 and 500 men for the cause. Rikabi did not address the veracity of these numbers, but did note enthusiastically that Maliki was not receiving such endorsements before the Basrah operation and now receives them regularly.

¶ 15. (C) McGurk said the aftermath of Maliki's operation against Iranian-backed Shia militants is the perfect time to redouble diplomatic efforts with the Arab neighbors, beginning with Maliki's attendance at the upcoming Neighbors, Conference in Kuwait. Rikabi was unmoved; in his view, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states only respect strength, and will not genuinely pursue relations until they consider the GOI to be strong. Rikabi predicted the Basrah operation will not convince the Saudis to pursue relations, but only to find a new excuse besides labeling Maliki a Persian. Maliki's attendance at the Neighbors, Conference would thus be unproductive or even demeaning, and the visit by the Ambassador and General Petraeus to Riyadh will prove likewise unless they bring a harsher message than in the past.

¶ 16. (C) Rikabi asked about the next round of U.S.-Iraq-Iran trilateral talks, which McGurk said the U.S. is prepared to resume ) although they will not be fruitful so long as Iran continues to arm, train, and supply militant groups. Rikabi agreed that these activities must stop, and said the government is sending this message. Rikabi added that Iran recently sent the unusual message that Tehran still supports Maliki as the best candidate for Prime Minister, but that he does not sufficiently &take care of8 his Iranian friends. He lamented that establishing productive relations with Iran will be a long struggle. McGurk warned Rikabi that Tehran surely is not

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pleased with the new political unity in Baghdad and will likely work in the coming weeks to weaken and divide Iraq's political class. Rikabi agreed that this is the game Tehran is trying to play.

¶ 17. (C) On the SFA/SOFA negotiations, Rikabi said the PM accepts the current two-team negotiating arrangement, but still wants it to produce a single document covering the bilateral relationship. He pressed at concern over recent U.S. statements the SFA would be &non-binding,<sup>8</sup> but McGurk reassured him the SFA will be the same as other strategic arrangements the U.S. enjoys with allies around the world, and noted that the statements in question pertain to domestic U.S. law and politics, not our commitment to a strong and enduring partnership. The SFA, he explained, is important to define a common vision for this partnership, and we should begin formal discussion as soon as possible.

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